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SUBJECT: AIR TRANSPORT FOR AFGHANS TO HAJJ - SITUATION IMPROVED WITH
SOME LINGERING UNCERTAINTIES

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REF: A) KABUL 5279 B) KABUL 5547 C) STATE 190219

1. (SBU) Afghanistan began its Hajj operation on November 22, and to date has transported slightly over 4000 Hajjis, in spite of some ongoing hurdles. GoA and Afghan air carriers have managed to solidify their plans for moving the some 24,000 Hajjis from four Afghan cities to Jeddah. State-owned carrier Ariana has had one flight a day the past several days from Kabul, carrying about half of the total passenger load. Private carrier KamAir has begun flights from Herat, Mazar, and Kandahar. The Embassy greatly appreciates support provided by AmEmbassy Riyadh and AmConsulate Jeddah in getting the SAG to act on approving safe aircraft from the two Afghan carriers (reftels).

2. (SBU) In spite of good progress, including success in securing air assets and requisite slots, Saudi visa issuance capacity here has emerged as a new issue. The problem is the Saudis have not been issuing visas fast enough to utilize the available slots. The Afghan MFA has been working to address this problem with the Saudi Charge D'Affaires here, and have confirmed to us that they have now reached agreement for the Saudis to provide 1000 visas per day.

3. (SBU) COMMENT: Although flights (aircraft and slots) are available to haul nearly 2000 Hajjis a day, the average after four days was less than 800 per day, which led to a number of delayed or cancelled flights. At this rate it would take 26 days to finish, assuming perfect weather, but there are only 26 days left, and weather issues are a constant factor here. If successfully implemented, the MFA agreement with the Saudis here to increase visa issuance would strengthen the viability of the Afghan Hajj operation. While the overall situation has taken a distinct turn for the better, we are continuing to monitor it closely and respond to ongoing requests for support from the Ministry of Transportation.
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